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SUBJECT: ISLAMISTS IN KUWAIT: CONTOURS OF A GROWING,
INFLUENTIAL FORCE

REF: 03 KUWAIT 03536

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Introduction: The Islamist movement in Kuwait reaches into every aspect and sector of Kuwaiti society. From grass-roots businesses to senior positions in government, Islamists have a strong voice throughout this country. Paradoxically, Islamists lead the national dialogue in calling for democratic reforms and political parties while at the same time calling for limiting the freedom of social expression and speech when they consider an issue to have infringed upon their interpretation of Islam. They hold influential political positions on the future of women's political rights, human rights practices, and educational reform. Through the medium of the rural tribes, their numbers and influence are growing in government and throughout the society. The mainstream Islamist rhetoric and ideology link them with more extremist Islamic elements, however their public rejection of extremist violence allows them to continue to operate and thrive in this already conservative Islamic society. Islamists are the most organized, well-funded, and aggressive political movement in Kuwait and appear to be growing in strength and influence. This overview cable on Kuwait's Islamists is an introduction to the many facets of Islamists and political Islam in Kuwait and is meant to highlight issues that will be researched and covered in greater detail in future reports. Post intends to investigate the role and influence of Islamists in Kuwaiti society and illuminate the key issues and complexities surrounding this social, ideological, and political movement. End Introduction

A Nation of Muslims or A Muslim Nation?

2. (C) Kuwait is unquestionably a nation of Muslims, but is it a Muslim nation? Even if this is answered in the affirmative, the definition must be made clear. What consensus is reached on the definition will in large part determine the direction of Kuwait's social, political, and economic development. While almost all Kuwaitis profess to be Muslims, there is a significant and growing number of Kuwaiti Islamists who are socially, ideologically, and politically motivated to proactively subjugate all Kuwaiti laws and customs to Qur'anic interpretation. They do this primarily through an open political process in the National Assembly, GOK ministries, and a wide-ranging cultural dialogue. Although not a monolithic group, Islamists also effect social change through conservative tribal influence and cultural strong-arming. Their influence has grown tremendously over the last three decades as Islamists have become prominent in Parliament and throughout government ministries. Many Kuwaitis blame the Al-Sabah ruling family for continuing to support the Islamists as a balance against "liberals" claiming the regime feels threatened by liberal calls for reform. Some members of the ruling Al-Sabah family are politically and personally close to influential Islamists. (Note: Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmad Al-Fahd is known to be close to some Islamist MPs like hard-line conservative Dr. Awad Barad. His brother, Kuwait State Security (KSS) head Athbi Al-Fahd, is known to be sympathetic to Islamist issues and to have close contacts with some notoriously anti-Western Islamists, and speculation is strong that Shaykh Salem Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, chairman of the body responsible for Gulf War POWs and brother of FM Shaykh Dr. Mohammed, financed Islamist MP Faisal Mislim's successful 2003 campaign for the National Assembly. However, these personal ties are outweighed by the general tendency of the Al-Sabah leadership to avoid internal conflicts with the Islamists. End Note.) As Islamists continue to advance their conservative agenda in Kuwaiti society, there is an ongoing public debate on whether their success is a result of the political support and permissiveness of the GOK or represents a successful political and social strategy that ranges from the grass-roots elements of local neighborhoods to the senior levels of government.

The Political Islamists: Who are They?

3. (U) There are many shades of Islamists in Kuwait (reftel). An Islamist is generically characterized as one who

practices, or appears to practice, Islam in a very conservative and pious manner and who favors political or cultural initiatives to ensure that society is in line with proper Qur'anic interpretation. This definition, however, still leaves Islamists with plenty of room for political self-definition. The issues that dominate Kuwait's Islamist political platform are often social ones. They are highlighted by an overwhelming effort to legislate morality in all sectors of life including education and human rights, and a general support for ensuring all legislation is in accordance with Shari'a interpretations. Foreign affairs issues are viewed through an anti-Israeli optic, and increasingly, an anti-Western and anti-U.S. one, particularly with respect to Western social and cultural practices.

14. (C) There are several active and influential Islamist political organizations in Kuwait:

-- The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) "al-haraka al-dostoriyah al-Islamiya" is the political arm of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, is represented by 2 MPs and constitutes part of the Sunni Islamist Bloc.

-- The Traditional Salafis (a.k.a. the Salafi Call) "al-da'wa al-salafiya" are strict Sunnis influenced by the Saudi Wahhabi brand of Islam. It is represented by 2 MPs and is part of the Sunni Islamist Bloc.

-- The Salafi Movement (a.k.a. the Scientific Salafis) "al-haraka al-salafiya" is a hard-line offshoot of the Traditional Salafis, is represented by 3 MPs and is part of the Sunni Islamist Bloc.

-- The National Islamic Alliance (NIA) "al-tahalof al-Islami al-wantani" is a pro-Iranian Shi'a group that some affiliate with Kuwaiti Hizballah, however, it has no representation in Parliament.

-- The Shi'a Clerics Congregation "tjam'u ulama' al-shi'a" is a Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani-influenced moderate Islamist group and has no representation in Parliament.

-- Lesser known Shi'a groups with no Parliamentary representation are the non-violent Peace and Justice group and the Consensus group (see reftel for a 2003 description of the groups.)

15. (U) Although there are officially only 13 Sunni Islamist MPs in the National Assembly, post places the number of Islamists in the 50-member elected Parliament at around 18-19, if four of the five Shi'a MPs and a few independent tribal MPs with heavy Islamist leanings are included. The Shi'a Islamists rarely work with the Sunni Islamists in support of public policy. Beyond this, several other MPs have varying degrees of Islamist political leanings and vote with known Islamists in support of issues such as educational segregation, legislating Islamic morality, and opposing women's suffrage. The reach of the Islamists on these and other political issues is great and allows them to wield more influence than their raw numbers would suggest. Even conservative members of the vocal anti-GOK Popular Action Bloc support, on some issues, the political agenda of the Islamists. Islamists hold influential sway in Parliament and wield a strong social veto against liberal and GOK policies that run counter to their political goals. Additionally, the GOK periodically permits Islamists to gain ground on heated political issues. Islamist influence also extends to the parliamentary committees as Sunni Bloc MPs chair five out of ten of the National Assembly standing committees and three out of nine ad hoc committees. The ad hoc Human Rights Committee is comprised completely of Islamists.

16. (U) Recent Islamist victories include several religiously motivated political "grillings" in the National Assembly, the gender segregation of Kuwait University, official fatwas placing restrictions on music concerts, legal leniency for suspected Islamist extremists, and the closing of movie theaters during the last ten days of Ramadan to "encourage people to spend more time reflecting on their faith." Other Islamist political initiatives include efforts, thus far unsuccessful, to amend Article II of Kuwait's constitution to make Islamic Shari'a law "the only" source of legislation for Kuwait and some fringe campaigns to ban all music in Kuwait.

17. (U) Post hears from many of its liberal and conservative contacts that Islamists succeed politically because they are better organized and better funded from the grass-roots level. The opposite appears to be true for the more liberal secular groups -- they are known to be poorly funded and organized and some liberal interlocutors have admitted candidly that liberals are politically lazy, whereas their Islamist counterparts are very vocal, organized, and active. (Note: A Kuwaiti "liberal" is a progressive and relatively secular individual who typically espouses more Western-style conventions of equality and liberty whereas a Kuwaiti "conservative" tends to support a strict application of

Islamic law and conservative bedouin traditions. End Note.)

Democracy As Islamists' Best Friend

18. (U) Many Kuwaiti Islamists see democracy as their sure path to power. Islamists are leading the calls for further democratization in Kuwait and are calling for full GOK transparency and political parties, which are currently unauthorized. (Note: In January, Salafis held a press conference to announce the establishment of the Hizb Al-Ummah political party. Liberals and the GOK criticized the party's ideology and the GOK was outraged at its call for the legal establishment of political parties. Both were also critical of Embassy attendance at this public event. End Note.) For the more conservative, religious Kuwaiti in the political minority or outside of the ruling regime, democratic reforms hold the promise of a fair and internationally accepted means by which to rise to power. Many liberal commentators theorize pessimistically that were Kuwait to become a fully functioning democracy, Islamists would undoubtedly rise to power with some speculating that women's suffrage would help the Islamists disproportionately. Some further speculate that Islamists might use the democratic process only to subvert it in order to prolong their power.

The Shi'a

19. (U) Not all of Kuwait's Islamists are Sunni. One third of Kuwait's citizens are Shi'a and among those are a large number of religiously conservative Muslims who advocate for more religion-based policies. Nonetheless, there are only five Shi'a MPs and no current Shi'a ministers. The Shi'a are politically fragmented and not nearly as organized as the Sunni, and because they are the minority, they must constantly jockey for political rights and mainstream religious acceptance. Speculation fuels some suspicion that Kuwaiti Shi'a hold loyalties toward Iran. This appears to be mostly unfounded as Kuwaiti Shi'a generally consider themselves Kuwaitis first and Shi'as second and thus enjoy great economic and social benefits, almost certainly minimizing any meaningful question of allegiance.

110. (C) The National Islamic Alliance (NIA) is the best-known Shi'a political grouping and is believed to be affiliated with pro-Iranian Kuwaiti Hizballah, an organization many claim doesn't exist. There has been speculation that Iran intends to finance future NIA and Shi'a parliamentary candidates -- a claim refuted by current Shi'a MPs. One liberal columnist claimed that the Kuwaiti Hizballah was very active and actually uses the NIA as cover. As an example of this, he pointed to the NIA's spring 2004 meeting at the Iranian Embassy in Kuwait, a story widely reported in local dailies. He added that Shi'a from other political factions ousted all NIA-affiliated MPs in the 2003 National Assembly elections and remarked that Hassan Jowhar is the only current MP who is close to the NIA. Although Jowhar's brother has been linked to Hizballah, MP Jowhar is not "publicly" affiliated with NIA, and is known as a moderate MP. In addition to the NIA there is the Shi'a Clerics Congregation, a Sistani-influenced moderate Islamist group; Sayed Mohammed Baqr Al-Mohri, a prominent Shi'a political figure, leads the group. Other lesser known groups are the non-violent Peace and Justice group, founded in 2003, and the Consensus group, which formerly had ties to the NIA. None of the Shi'a members of Parliament are affiliated with these groups.

Islamists in Government

111. (C) Islamists are prevalent throughout the ministries, the military, the police, and all other sectors of the government. They are advancing in prominence throughout the ranks of mid-level bureaucrats and even to some senior positions. (Note: There are three Islamist Cabinet members: Justice Minister Ahmed Bager, Awqaf Minister Dr. Abdullah Al-Maatouq, and Health Minister Dr. Mohammed Al-Jarallah. End Note.) Liberal Kuwaitis claim that to get ahead in the ministries one must grow a beard and speak the language of Islamists. Some point out that most of their managers, whether in a ministry or in the National Assembly, are Islamists, or at the very least, tend to favor Islamists. Others claim that junior, less qualified employees often bypass more seasoned, politically moderate employees because of their ideology. (Comment: While there are still a great many politically moderate, non-Islamist Kuwaitis throughout the GOK bureaucracy, PoOffs have noted that many mid-level ministry and parliamentary interlocutors are Islamists or appear to be sympathetic to Islamist politics. End Comment.)

112. (C) Islamists and rural conservative bedouin are also in the military in significant numbers -- perhaps one quarter or more are at least culturally Islamist or bedouin. (Note: Not all bedouin are Islamist, although many are. While bedouin and Islamists share many of the same cultural beliefs, tribal ties, and conservative mores, bedouin do not necessarily

always subscribe to a fundamentalist Islamic political agenda. End Note.) Liberal contacts claim that in some units there is professional and peer pressure to behave more piously and adopt conservative attitudes. Some units are populated more heavily by bedouin than others. Two members of an artillery unit believed to be predominantly "bedouin" were arrested in early January 2005 for planning to attack U.S. military forces during an exercise. It is also popularly believed that the Islamists "control" the police and the prisons -- conservative bedouin are known to be heavily employed in both government sectors.

¶13. (U) Despite assurances from Salafi Justice Minister Ahmed Bager that the judicial process is wedded to the rule of law and not influenced by political forces, many liberals claim it is run by Islamists. All judges are subject to GOK approval and many judges in Kuwait's court system are non-citizens who serve out 1-3 year renewable contracts, which almost certainly undermines their independence. Many non-citizen judges are Egyptians trained in Shari'a law and not Kuwaiti civil code, thereby increasing the likelihood of rulings based on religious interpretation. Lenient sentencing of Kuwaiti extremists has also raised questions about the objectivity of the judicial system.

It's A Tribal Thing

¶14. (C) The tribes in Kuwait make up a sizable and influential portion of the society. They are not necessarily Islamist, but because of a combination of their conservative bedouin mentality and strong emphasis on cultural Islam, the message of the tribal Islamist parliamentary candidates resonates more convincingly among this growing segment of society. The increase of rural Kuwaitis is an important political demographic development because few urban Kuwaitis have more than one wife and typically have smaller families, while many among the rural bedouin are known to have several wives and numerous children. The growth of conservative Islamic culture in Kuwait owes much to the influence of the tribes -- even urban Kuwaitis are still very "tribal" in their understanding of politics, culture, and society. Among more than fifty prominent tribes in Kuwait, the Utaibi, Ajmi, Enezi, Mutairi, Mulaifi, Hajiri, and Kandari are some of the largest and some extend from Saudi Arabia to Iraq.

¶15. (U) Islamist parliamentary candidates are elected to serve their rural constituents, not primarily to debate and address national policy. They are chosen from within the tribes and put forward with the near-certain backing of many families. This is partly attributed to the small electoral district system. Tribes are influential because they are chains of families that support and defend the interests of one another. As a member of a tribe, who your spouse is, where you work, and what your position in life is are all matters often arranged or guided by the tribe. Familial relationships often trump rule of law throughout Kuwaiti society, but especially among the rural bedouin tribes. The tribes have a provincial, almost sheltered, quality to them that also make them a potential breeding ground for the growth of intolerant ideologies. (Note: Many interlocutors have raised concerns that the cross-border tribal ties with Saudi Arabia allow for easy exchange of radical ideology and indeed even militants. End Note.)

¶16. (C) Kuwait University Sociology professor Dr. Khaldoun Al-Naqeeb calls tribalism the "disease of the soul." Because the average Kuwaiti will put his tribe first before all outsiders, he ends up treating people differently. This element adds immeasurably to the filter through which many Kuwaitis view the world: favoring local identity over outsiders. Although the culture as a whole remains conservative, strong blends of liberalism and conservative thought, which might conventionally be seen as contradictory, appear to coexist within the mindset of many Kuwaitis. At base, Dr. Khaldoun explained, there is a fear of the unknown that pervades the region. This fear leads most people invariably back to their roots, back to the known, and therefore back to a conservative Islamic worldview.

Not All Al-Qaeda

¶17. (U) The perception that the majority of Muslims support violent extremism, particularly Arab Muslims who proclaim a less tolerant version of Islam and who dress the part -- wearing the shorter dishdasha and a longer beard -- is wrong in most cases. Further, those who align themselves with conservative religious groups such as the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood should not be assumed to be intolerant to all things Western. While a clear majority of those in these ideological camps oppose many elements of U.S. Middle East policy, especially where support for Israel is concerned, many in these groups can also be pragmatic on broader issues such as Iraqi reconstruction and Iranian proclivities in the region.

18. (U) An example of mainstream Kuwaiti Islamist moderation is the local political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ICM. The ICM is not necessarily always in step with the international Muslim Brotherhood and differs significantly, for example, on the use of force in Iraq. The ICM, although upholding the anti-Israeli position of the international Muslim Brotherhood, strongly supported the U.S.-led coalition's liberation of Iraq and supports U.S. post-war Iraqi reconstruction and development efforts. (Note: The ICM's support for U.S.-led military actions is most likely a result of their experience under Iraqi occupation. End Note.) Most Salafis and Muslim Brotherhood members in Kuwait reject publicly any support for terrorist activities. While there is apparently a growing number, however small, of those who are actively supporting terror cells in Kuwait, few, if any, will publicly announce such support.

Kuwaiti Jihadist Movement Not So Small

19. (C) In light of the string of shoot-outs and unearthed terror plots, many are now considering that the growth of an extreme jihadist ideology in Kuwait is not isolated among a few dozen "misguided" citizens. While extremists still make up only a small fraction of Kuwaitis, their numbers are almost certainly rising. The recent January 2005 shoot-outs with Kuwait security forces coupled with extensive investigations and media coverage, beginning last summer, of known terrorist supporters and Kuwaiti jihadis has revealed a disturbing trend in Kuwaiti membership in these organizations. Many Kuwaitis contend that the numbers are still small, but post suspects that the numbers of militant-minded Kuwaitis willing to support or conduct terror operations in Iraq or Kuwait could be above the thousand person estimate to which only the most liberal in this society will admit. However our intelligence and insight into the militant wing of political Islam is limited, so any estimate should be viewed with skepticism. So far, the number of Kuwaitis who are ready to die for their Islamist beliefs appears quite small.

20. (U) After the recent terror events in Kuwait, mainstream Islamists are scrambling to launch awareness campaigns against violence and extremism. They are desperate to show they are not the same as those extremists who not only advocate violence but carry it out. Islamist groups are expected to meet to develop a mechanism to fight radicalism. A campaign is growing containing fatwas from scholars and verses from the Qur'an, which call for tolerance and reject terror and violence. The new attitude might prevent such episodes as that in late 2004, when Saudi preacher and known jihad advocate Nasser Al-Omar was permitted to enter Kuwait -- despite a GOK decision to prevent him from lecturing or participating in seminars or political activity in Kuwait -- and to speak at the diwanis of Islamist MPs. All mainstream Islamists officially deny that they support or sympathize with violent extremism. While most are probably honest in characterizing their ideology, some clearly limit their comments, or actually lie, to hide their true beliefs. Amer Khlaif Al-Enezi -- the captured militant imam involved in the January shoot-outs with security forces who recently died of "heart failure" while in custody -- when questioned last year, maintained that he was against terrorism and extremist ideologies. An Awqaf Ministry official said, "It is surprising Amer always spoke ill of terrorists and terrorism, but surprisingly he himself indulged in these activities."

21. (U) Most of the Kuwaiti jihadists come from rural tribes in western and southeastern Kuwait. Islamist spring youth camps and summer clubs, most affiliated with either the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis, are known to inculcate young Kuwaitis in religious ideology -- viewed by many non-Islamists to be an intolerant ideology. These camps have no GOK oversight or regulation. Further, there are fringe Kuwaiti Islamists who run secret camps known to teach violent jihad. Kuwaitis who have attended both mainstream and jihadi camps are known to have supported, recruited, and facilitated jihadis inside Kuwait -- and some have even taken part in militant jihad in Iraq. (Note: A September 11, 2004 Washington Post article noted that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed confessed that "he was drawn to violent jihad after joining the Brotherhood in Kuwait at age 16 and attending its desert youth camps." End Note.)

22. (U) Some liberals and moderates blame mainstream Islamists for the growth of jihadism in Kuwait. Until recently, all considered this mentality to be a foreign one; however, that assessment is changing. The intolerant political message of the mainstream Islamists has been allowed to spread without restraint, and some would argue with GOK acquiescence. Many believe that these "mainstream" messages have fueled the hatred and intolerance now driving the extremists. After the mid-January shoot-outs, MP Walid Al-Tabtabaei was criticized by moderates for his

too-little-too-late criticism of the spreading violence after he was a chief purveyor of anti-Western rumor-mongering and intolerant rhetoric.

Liberals Critical of Growing Islamism

123. (C) Some liberals claim that the Islamist movement has been permitted by the GOK to grow unchecked for several decades. One liberal columnist remarked that since Shaykh Jabir became Amir in the late 1970s, the GOK has played a key role in pursuing "backward" policies. He pointed out the growth of the Kuwait Finance House, an "Islamic bank" which is financially supported by the GOK, the rising influence of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, and the segregation of the sexes at Kuwait University. He said that the problem is that people are in a state of confusion. If PM Shaykh Sabah had his way, he explained, there would be a noticeable move to more liberal policies, but, he explained, Shaykh Sabah must still work within the conservative system established by his brother the Amir. In contrast, many contacts claim that Islamism grew tremendously in Kuwait after large numbers of Kuwaitis returned in 1991 from exile in Saudi Arabia while waiting out the Iraqi occupation. Many of the returnees brought with them elements of the Saudi Wahhabi ideology. Some Kuwaiti Islamists own date farms in Saudi Arabia -- some in the Qaseem area where Saudi extremists are prevalent -- and travel there regularly.

124. (C) Another liberal columnist said he is concerned that democratic freedoms in the Middle East will bring Islamists to power. While he supports democratic freedoms, "Islamists," he remarked, "choke society's political and social life." He alluded to the Taliban as the ultimate example of a dysfunctional Islamic society. He also claimed that there is a dearth of intelligentsia in the Arab world and this is hurting the region. No one, because of his affiliation with one group or another, he explained, is free to speak his mind about real reform. They all carry heavy biases, he stated, and will not oppose the ideas of their own group even if such opposition would benefit their country.

125. (C) A liberal professor and former cabinet minister offered to PolOff some examples of how Islamists take ownership of religion to suit their actions and causes. He explained that during the 2003 general elections Islamist campaign banners were posted in unauthorized locations, but authorities were hesitant to take them down because the name of God was printed on the banner -- removing the name of God from a public venue could be seen as anti-Islamic. He also recalled when an Islamist student walked in late to a class he was teaching at Kuwait University. He scolded the student for arriving late and interrupting the class. The student justified his tardiness by claiming that he was coming from afternoon prayers. The professor responded that study was valued more than prayer in the Qur'an. He explained to the student that the very first word in the Qur'an is the command to read. The student, he recounted, was indignant that a liberal professor would instruct him about Islam.

Kuwait Historically Conservative

126. (U) Kuwaiti society has always been conservative relative to much of the Middle East -- although it is seen as somewhat moderate in the Gulf -- and while some argue convincingly that conservatism has gained momentum over the last three decades, it should surprise no one that many Kuwaitis, at the very least, want to portray themselves as pious Muslims. Kuwait's constitution, adopted in 1962, identifies Islam as the state religion and Islamic Shari'a law as "a main source of legislation." Some Sunni Islamists argue that Kuwait moved away from its natural conservatism during the nationalist movement in the 1950s and 1960s and is only now moving back to its "cultural norms." While most Islamists are accurately characterized as supporting more conservative social policies and are often outspoken about any issue regarding Israel and increasingly the U.S., the overwhelming majority publicly reject the politics and violence of Islamic extremism.

127. (U) Islamists see themselves not as intolerant or narrow-minded, but as champions of a noble and moral cause. By definition, they claim a religious and moral high ground that infuses them with a great sense of confidence in their mission. They, in turn, often see liberals as agents of the West and licentious purveyors of immorality and ideas that are not in-line with the tenets of Islam. They argue that many liberal goals undermine society and that they must fight to defend their faith and culture, albeit in non-violent ways, against immoral or alien influences.

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